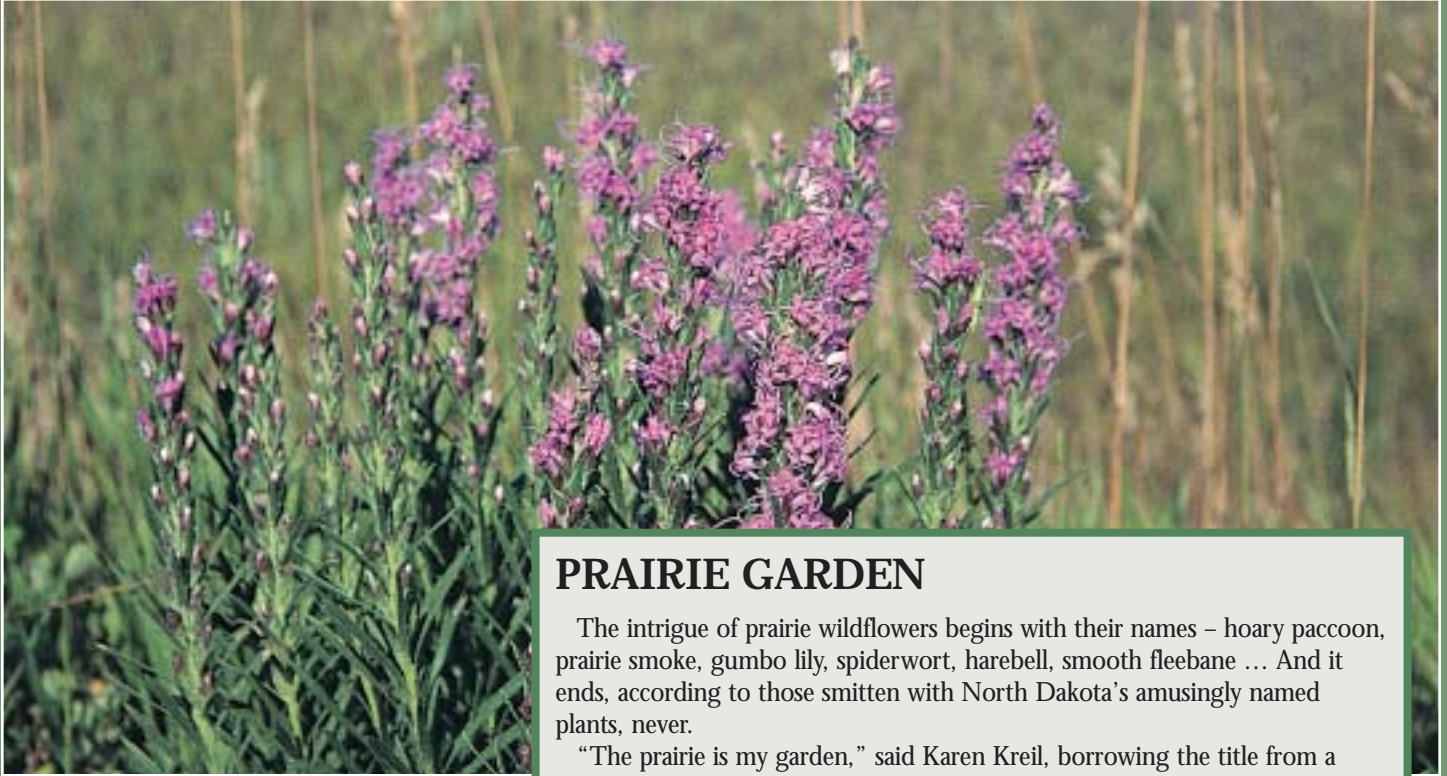


A CLOSER LOOK



Blazing star

PRAIRIE GARDEN

The intrigue of prairie wildflowers begins with their names – hoary paccoon, prairie smoke, gumbo lily, spiderwort, harebell, smooth fleebane ... And it ends, according to those smitten with North Dakota's amusingly named plants, never.

"The prairie is my garden," said Karen Kreil, borrowing the title from a well-known painting by Harvey Dunn. "There is something new, something always blooming throughout the growing season."

The starting gun of North Dakota's prairie wildflowers is a plant whose song, Dakota Indians believe, encourages other plants to awaken. "Spring starts with pasque flowers (or prairie crocus) and then it's something different every couple of weeks throughout the growing season," said Kreil, prairie lover and biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Bismarck, of the mid-April to mid-May blooming wildflower.

One of the stars of North Dakota's prairie garden is the dotted blazing star, which can be found blooming in upland prairies statewide from August to October. "It's one of the most beautiful prairie wildflowers that we have," Kreil said. "It's still hanging around in early fall. You go out grouse hunting and it's still blooming."

Dotted blazing star stands anywhere from 8-40 inches tall. Its flowers are light purple and found on an unbranched, thick, spike-like main stock. Historians tell us the deep taproot of this plant was used by Plains Indians for healing wounds, swelling, and other ailments. Today, a program fostered by noxious weed experts has gardeners from around the state swapping troublesome, exotic purple loosestrife for blazing star. It's more than a fair trade that brings a little of the prairie into town.

Dotted blazing star gets the "dotted" part of its name from the numerous tiny dots found on the underside of its leaves. Each dot, scientists tell us, contains resin that likely deters animals from eating the plant. This defense mechanism doesn't deter the small clouds of butterflies, however, that gather to feed on the blazing star's nectar.

To gain an appreciation for the prairie and its colorful inhabitants, you need to dirty hiking boots and the knees of jeans. "You can't fly by the prairie at 70 miles per hour," Kreil said. "There's a subtle beauty that can't be appreciated through your windshield."

Plus, it's tough to feel and smell a wildflower at that speed.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota *OUTDOORS*.